In October of 1946, war-ravaged Europe was still in the beginning stages of rebuilding its bombed-out cities. The victorious allied nations that had defeated the Nazis just a year earlier were making a concerted effort to provide aid to most of the continent. Everyone had suffered during the conflict, but perhaps those in the greatest need of assistance were Europe’s poor, blind children.

Helen Keller landed in Britain in October. She and her companion, Polly Thomson, were on a mission to provide hope and awareness to the plight of blind. Over a two-month planned European tour of most of southern Europe, they would visit orphanages, collect data, and meet with leaders of each country, stressing the need to serve those who could not serve themselves.
On Saturday, November 23rd, they were traveling from Greece to Rome when tragedy struck their home of the last seven years in Easton, Connecticut.

Front page photograph from the Bridgeport Post Sunday, November 24, 1946

NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, November 24, 1946.
$50,000 Fire Razes Helen Keller’s Home - Treasured Antiques Destroyed in Blaze

Special to The New York Times.

EASTON, Conn., Nov. 23—The twelve-room home of Miss Helen Keller, internationally known blind educator, at the junction of Redding and Westport Roads was destroyed by fire today, and as firemen dampened the ruins only a small part of the wall in the left wing of the wooden building remained standing. Easton firemen, aided by apparatus from near-by Fairfield, were handicapped by lack of water and a high wind, which fanned the flames, and which gained considerable headway before being discovered at 10 AM. Fire officials were unable to determine the cause. As far as could ascertained, no one was in the house, as it had been closed for the winter after Miss Keller went abroad in October. Also destroyed in the blaze were valuable antiques and other treasured furnishings. The loss was estimated at $50,000. The blaze was discovered by Harry B. Tucker of Easton, who saw the flames leaping from the roof around a stone chimney. Designed and constructed by Cameron Clark, New York architect, in 1939, the house was given to Miss Keller by Gustave A Pfeiffer of Easton, a New York manufacturer of pharmaceutics and cosmetics, who learned she was looking for a house in the area. He also gave her four and a half acres of land. The interior of the New England-type house followed an Oriental motif planned about rare treasures presented to Miss Keller by the Chinese Government. Choice bric-a-brac, rugs, lamps of an exotic nature and vases were at home in a setting that emphasized the Chinese coloring of red gold and blue. Jades, ivories and porcelains were among Miss Keller’s choice collections, as well as rare pieces of hammered brass and copper.
It should be noted that “Harry B. Tucker”, was in fact Henry B. Tucker, one of the Tucker brothers, the first men paid as full-time firemen at the Easton Volunteer House. Chief Arthur Bush introduced the plan to man the firehouse 24-hours a day on January 6, 1947, only forty-four days after the fire that leveled Arcan Ridge; a fire that was no doubt the catalyst in the chief’s making the decision that a growing Easton needed faster response times when it came to fighting fires. Ironically, had either Henry or his twin brother, Arthur, been employed by the town that day, perhaps Easton’s lone firetruck would have been dispatched in time to save at least part of the structure. Adding to the tragic irony was the fact that the fire company’s new Mack pumper, with it’s 500 Gallon-per-Minute pump had been on order since January 1946 but didn’t arrive in Easton until March 3, 1947.

A simple fifteen-word cable from associate George Raverat in Paris was delivered to Helen and Polly’s hotel in Rome on the morning of November 24th.
Cable to Helen Keller from George Raverat dated November 24, 1946. “Herbert” was Herbert Haas, Keller’s chauffeur and the caretaker of Arcan Ridge. Photo courtesy of the American Federation of the Blind, Helen Keller Archive.

A newspaper article in Australia’s Melbourne Sun, published in May of 1948, summed up Polly’s dilemma with reading that cable to Helen, and Helen’s fortitude in her response:

The depth of Helen’s appreciation of the other’s loving companionship was brought home by a story which Polly Thompson told me. In 1946, while Helen Keller was on the
Continent, collecting statistics on the war blinded. A cable was delivered to Polly Thompson stating that Helen Keller’s home in Connecticut had been burned to the ground and all her possessions, including manuscripts which had taken her many years to compile, had been lost. It meant irreparable loss and the breaking of the news was one of the hardest things Polly Thompson had ever faced. For a couple of hours, she carried the cable around, holding back the news, but at last she plucked up courage and told Helen of the calamity. For a minute Helen was silent and then, turning to Polly, said: “What does it really matter—we still have the house of friendship.” In that one sentence the woman whose amazing courage in the face of heavy afflictions has made world history showed her complete disregard of material things. The day before the arrival of the cable Helen Keller had bought from an art shop in Rome a small statuette which appealed to her. With that as her one possession and Polly Thompson’s warm handclasp she was ready to face the future unafraid.

Details would follow in the ensuing days of the fire, but the one thing that was certain was that virtually everything in the house had been lost. Another cable caught up with Keller and Thomson in Paris two days after the fire. While the pair had traveled from Rome to Paris on Monday, their benefactors, Gustav and Louise Pfeiffer, had already set plans in motion to provide them with temporary housing while a new house would be built. Harvard House sat next door to the Pfeiffer home on Old Redding Road and was used during the summer months by Pfeiffer’s nephew Robert and his wife Mathilda. Helen and Polly knew the house well, as the Pfeiffer’s had put them up at Harvard House while the home at Arcan Ridge was being built in 1939. Other friends of Helen Keller were already working at finding replacement volumes for her library, as well as a new Braille typewriter to allow her to continue her work once she returned to Easton.
Back in Connecticut, investigators were attempting to find the cause of the blaze:

BRIDGEPORT, CONN. POST November 26, 1946

CAUSE IN DOUBT IN KELLER BLAZE!

State Joins Easton Chief in Probe of $50,000 Fire.
EASTON, Nov. 26. Investigation of the cause of the fire which on Saturday razed the Redding road home of Miss Helen Keller, blind educator, was being continued today, Fire Chief Arthur J Bush said. Preliminary investigation yesterday by State Policeman James M. Riordon, representing the State Fire Marshal, and town fire and police officials unearthed no conclusive evidence regarding the cause of the blaze, although investigators believed it possible that the fire resulted from a defective oil burner, Chief Bush said. During the three-hour search of the ruins, it was officially confirmed that a furnace repairman had been admitted Friday to the closed home to turn on the oil burning furnace as a protection against anticipated cold weather. The investigators also disclosed that neighbors reported seeing smoke issuing from the chimney of the house as early as 6:30 a.m. Saturday. The 12-room house, known as “Windy Ridge”, was closed in October when Miss Keller went abroad. Built in 1939 at a cost of $25,000, it contained a valuable collection of antique and exotic furnishings, none of which was saved. Damage was estimated unofficially by Fire Chief Arthur Bush at more than $50,000. An accurate estimate of the loss cannot be made until Miss Keller is reached and can give an inventory of what was in the home. Attempts have been made by Mrs. Charles Rauschkolb, a neighbor, to contact Miss Keller in Europe through blind institutions in New York and Paris, but Miss Keller is believed to be visiting homes for the blind in either Greece or Rome at this time, officials said.

The “Windy Ridge” reference in the above article had once been the name of the property and the original house that was there when Helen Keller decided to build in 1938. The name was changed to Arcan Ridge in 1939 when the new house was first completed. Arcan was the name of a Scottish village that Helen had visited a few years before that she very much favored.

Arcan Ridge was completely rebuilt and ready for occupancy in October of 1947. Built
under the supervision of the original architect, Charles Cameron Clark, the new house was exactly like the first with only one or two minor modifications relating to the dining porch at the rear of the building. Polly lived there until her death on March 20, 1960. Helen Keller called *Arcan Ridge* home until her own passing on June 1, 1968.